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AUTHOR	Bratton, Barry
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ABSTRACT

This chapter contains a description of the research strategy and subsequent results of a study that was conducted to gather information about Instructional Improvement Centers (IIC) in higher education. An IIC is an organization that is charged with facilitating the improvement of those competencies of faculty members that will lead to an improvement of teaching and learning. Data collected via a literature review and questionnaires covered four areas: (1) staff and organization; (2) professional activities; (3) financial support; and (4) philosophy and future direction. The data are analyzed and discussed under the four headings, and conclusions concerning appropriate actions in each of the four areas are given. A five-item bibliography is provided, as well as a list of the institutions that provided data for the survey. (Author/EW)

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CHAPTER VIII

INSTRUCTIONAL IMPROVEMENT CENTERS IN HIGHER EDUCATION

By
Barry Bratton

This chapter contains a description of the research strategy and subsequent results of a study to gather information about instructional improvement centers in higher education. Gaff (1975) defines an "instructional improvement center" (IIC) as "an organization that is charged with the responsibility of facilitating the continuing development of professional and personal competencies of faculty, particularly those that lead to the improvement of teaching and learning" (p. 114). Gaff describes a typical IIC in these terms: "It has a permanent professional staff of modest size, administers a small grant program for instructional innovation, provides consultation to interested faculty, works with teaching assistants, and generally acts to emphasize the importance and improve the quality of teaching" (p. 115).

This study grew out of a pragmatic need. Working with administrators and faculty at his home institution, the author noted their curiosity concerning instructional development activities at other universities. Frequently, specific questions were asked about campus-wide centers. The number of professional staff employed in the centers, the types of activities the staff performed, the goals of the program, and the financial support were some common concerns. In some cases the questioner's intent was to compare the home institution with others similar to it. In several instances, too, the author would have found it valuable to have had at his disposal the information about other comparable institutions' efforts at instructional development. Hence, a study was undertaken to gather information about campus-wide IIC's at higher education institutions which were similar to the University of Iowa.

The goals of the study were to collect "hard data" on four issues surrounding these centers: 1) staff and organization, 2) professional activities, 3) financial support, and 4) philosophy and future direction.

A review of the literature uncovered a paucity of studies which report data regarding these issues for specific kinds of educational institutions. Alexander and Yelon (1972), Gaff (1975) and McMillan (1975) gathered survey data about instructional improvement centers, but in each case the information was drawn from higher education institutions in general. No reports were located in the literature which provided information related to specific types of institutions. The above publications, though, were very helpful in suggesting the range, type and format

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of questions to be asked in future studies.

It was decided to collect the information first hand via a questionnaire sent to the directors of IIC's in selected higher educational institutions. An institution was selected for inclusion in this study if it satisfied any one of the following three criteria.

The first criterion was developed by the author to reflect the "personality identification" of the institution. It stipulated that the institution must be located in a state which contained a Big Ten or Big Eight school, was state supported, offered graduate degrees beyond the masters' level and had a 1974–75 enrollment over 14,500 students.

The second criterion concerned "academic role" and was adapted from Gross (1968). This required that the institution grant the Ph.D. degree in four fields (humanities, biological sciences, physical sciences, and social sciences), that the doctorate degrees granted in the two least emphasized fields exceed 10 per cent of the total degrees conferred, that there be a liberal arts undergraduate school and at least three professional schools, that the school granted ten or more graduate degrees in 1963–64, and that the institution was state supported.

The third criterion focused on the "research orientation" of the institution. It demanded that the institution be identified as a Research Institution I according to the Carnegie Commission on Higher Education (1973) and that the student enrollment exceed 10,000.

Eighty-eight institutions were identified as satisfying one or more criteria and therefore were qualified for inclusion in the study. Further investigation disclosed that campus-wide IIC's were in operation at only 40 of the eligible institutions.

Identifying the IIC director to whom to send the questionnaire at each of the 40 institutions proved to be a difficult task. It was often necessary to personally contact professional colleagues around the country in order to identify the prospective respondents.

A 21-item questionnaire was developed to address four issues. Six questions were asked which were related to professional staff and organization. Eight questions concerned professional activities. Two questions sought information relative to financial support. Five questions inquired about philosophy and future directions.

The questionnaire was mailed to each of the 40 IIC directors in March, 1976. Follow-up efforts to retrieve the questionnaires included a second mailing and a phone call to non-respondents. Thirty-three of the 40 directors returned the questionnaire – a response rate of 82%. However, seven of the centers were dropped from the study when it was learned that they were no longer in operation or served only limited segments of the campus. This left questionnaires from 26 campus-wide IIC directors to serve as the data base for the study.[1]

Findings of the Study

The majority of the findings of the study will be reported as averages or percentages of the total response. In some cases the actual number of the responses will be given separately for each of the two groups, the 12 relatively newer centers (less than five years old) and the 14 older centers (five years or more). It is important to note that nearly 50% of all the centers contributing to the study have been in existence for less than five years.

PROFESSIONAL STAFF AND ORGANIZATION

FULL-TIME PROFESSIONAL STAFF

The number of full-time professionals employed by each center ranged from 0 to 25 employees. One-half of the centers, however, employed only one, two or three persons. The average number of professionals in the newer centers was 2.5 while in the older centers it was 7.3. Two older centers listed their professional staff size as 18 and 25, respectively.

These full-time professionals represented a broad range of academic disciplines and fields of experience. The largest group, 43%, came from Education, 12% from Psychology, 6% from Communications, and 5% from English. One or two staff persons were identified from each of the following areas: Art, Biology, Chemistry, Cinema, Classics, Computer Sciences, Criminology, Engineering, Genetics, Mathematics, Physics, Sociology, Speech, and Statistics.

Within the Education group, the most prominent speciality was Educational Psychology followed closely by Educational Technology or Instructional Design. Higher Education and Counselor Education were also mentioned frequently. Other reported subgroups were Educational Measurement, Curriculum and General Education.

Institutional support for the salaries of the full-time professional staff ranged from 0% to 100%. Sixteen of the centers (64%) reported all their full-time professionals were paid entirely from institutional "hard" funds – as opposed to outside, "soft", funding sources. Seven of the 12 newer centers said this was the case, as did nine of the 14 older centers. The institution contributed at least two-thirds of the salary support in four centers, but in two instances no institutional support for salaries was provided.

PART-TIME PROFESSIONAL STAFF

Approximately 60% of all the centers reported employing part-time professionals. The number of these employees per center ranged from 1–10 with an average of two. Part-time professionals were found more frequently in the newer centers.

NONPROFESSIONAL STAFF

All of the centers but one reported the employment of full-time nonprofessionals. The number of these employees per center ranged from 1 to 34; however, one-half of the centers employed three or less. An average of two nonprofessionals was employed in each newer center while a mean of six was working in the older centers.

LOCATION IN THE INSTITUTION

In all cases each center was located high in the institution's organizational structure. Fourteen of the directors (56%) reported to the institution's Vice-President for Academic Affairs (or chief academic officer) and 44% reported to a dean, director, or associate vice-president who in turn reported to the Vice-President.

PROFESSIONAL ACTIVITIES

ROLES

When offered two different descriptions of IIC activities, one focusing on a service orientation, the other centering on faculty development, 50% of the directors selected the latter as the best reflection of their center. Twelve per cent identified with the service role. Thirty-eight per cent, however, indicated that they performed in both roles or that the descriptions were too narrow and that their centers offered much broader programs. One respondent, for example, wrote: "We assist, encourage and facilitate efforts of the faculty to improve their instructional activities, to explore educational innovations and to evaluate the quality of their educational efforts."

FACULTY REWARDS/INCENTIVES

All of the respondents reported that their institutions provided some type of reward or incentive to faculty who engaged in instructional development activities. In most instances more than one type of reward was available. Offering the faculty small project grants was by far the most popular as it was used by 22 (85%) of the institutions. About 50% offered promotional considerations, reduced teaching loads, and leaves of absences as incentives. Eight institutions provided copyright privileges and/or salary increments.

CLIENTS

Ten of the respondents (38%) reported that they had either no information or limited information about their clientele. Several offered estimates. From the data provided, it appears that 36% of the centers' clients were basic and applied science faculty, 32% liberal arts faculty, and 24% were professional school faculty.

Both tenured and nontenured faculty were reported to use the centers; each group made up approximately 40% of the total clientele. Others who reportedly made use of the centers were department chairpersons, graduate teaching assistants and off-campus clients.

It is interesting to note that one-half of the newer centers and nearly one-fourth of the older centers acknowledged that they kept either no records at all or only limited records regarding the characteristics of their clientele.

Fourteen, or slightly more than 50% of the centers reported that they maintained a laboratory or other facility specifically for research and development in instruction.

Nearly all the directors (88%) indicated that a faculty advisory committee helped to determine the center's policies and activities.

A large number of the centers (62%) provided assistance to individuals or agencies located outside of the formal university structure.

Only eight centers (31%) reported that they evaluate faculty teaching for purposes of promotion or tenure. In fact, several respondents added comments emphasizing that the evaluation of teaching was definitely not a part of their activities.

STAFF ACTIVITIES

Three IIC directors did not respond to items concerned with staff activities, and several others reported they could provide only estimates concerning the percentages of time their staffs spent on selected kinds of tasks. Bearing this in mind, it appears that the average center staff spent about 40% of its time working on individual course revision, 8% of its time with department-wide course revisions, 4% of its time in college-wide curriculum revisions, and 18% of its time in other activities including research, writing grant proposals, presenting workshops and administrative duties.

When asked if they would like to change the percentage of time the center's staff spends on each of the above activities, twelve, or nearly 50%, of the directors stated they would like to do so. Six each were from older and newer centers. In general, the directors envisioned reducing the amount of time spent in individual faculty projects and course revisions while increasing the time spent in department-wide and college-wide activities. The general feeling seemed to be that these changes would increase the impact and effectiveness of the centers in their institutions.

STRATEGIES

EFFECTIVE STRATEGIES

Techniques which the centers have found the most effective in eliciting faculty support and encouraging the faculty's use of the centers' services fell under three general headings. The most frequently

mentioned technique was personal contact. This included promotional mailings to the faculty, relying on satisfied client's word-of-mouth promotion and conducting workshops designed to meet faculty needs.

Projecting a service orientation was another commonly mentioned technique. Respondents said that they found it valuable to downplay the professional educator role and missionary orientation, that they seek out and attempt to meet faculty needs, that they try to create a nonthreatening climate with respect to change, that they zero in on specific projects and that they attempt to develop a respected performance record of high quality.

Providing incentives and rewards for faculty engaging in instructional development was the third most often mentioned technique. Activities most often cited took the form of the examples mentioned earlier, such as mini-grants for specific projects, reduced teaching loads and leaves of absence while engaging in instructional development projects.

INEFFECTIVE STRATEGIES

The respondents' warnings about ineffective strategies did not fall into identifiable categories. Some suggested that any activities that interfered with strategies already known to be effective would certainly be deleterious. Beyond that the respondents each seemed to have discovered their own poisons. Some examples of ineffective strategies which were mentioned were acting too aggressively, offering workshops of a general nature, offering workshops on specific topical subjects, distributing too much promotional literature, not publicizing the availability of the center's services and appearing to act as a servant of the central administration.

FINANCIAL SUPPORT

BUDGET SOURCES

Eleven centers (42%) reported that their entire operating budgets came from their institution's hard dollars, while only one director (4%) reported total reliance upon non-university financial support. The other 14 centers (54%) reported that their budgets were supported by some mix of university, government and private funding, with half of these (27%, or 7 centers) reporting that university funds made up 75% or more of this mix in their cases. It is interesting to note that while only two of the newer centers relied on federal or state government grants, seven of the older centers used these sources. On the other hand, while seven of the newer centers made use of foundations or private grants, only two of the older centers did so.

OPERATING BUDGETS

The annual operating budgets for the centers for 1975–76 were reported to range from $25,000 to over $500,000. As might be expected, the size of the annual budget correlated strongly with the number of persons employed in the center. Two-thirds of the newer centers reported annual budgets under $100,000 while two-thirds of the older centers reported annual budgets in excess of that amount.

PHILOSOPHY AND DIRECTION

INSTITUTION INNOVATIVENESS

About one-half of the respondents regarded their institutions as "average" relative to innovative teaching practices when compared to other universities. Slightly less than half believed that their institutions were more innovative than most while a few perceived theirs as conservative. No directors felt that their institutions were either extremely innovative or extremely conservative.

IMPETUS FOR ESTABLISHING THE IIC

The respondents found it difficult to identify the major impetus for establishing their centers. Many felt that there were several driving forces working in combination. Most often mentioned as sources of impetus were the university's central administration and the university faculty. A number of the directors credited their own personal efforts. In no case was the institution's governing board or the state legislature credited with providing the impetus.

FUTURE DIRECTIONS

The directors predicted that changes would occur in their IIC's over the next three years. The types of changes suggested fell into four broad categories. The most often cited change involved efforts at redirecting the activities of the center away from individual faculty projects and toward department-wide course projects. Also mentioned was the placing of more emphasis on the development of individualized learning designs and the providing of seminars and workshops for faculty and teaching assistants. Some single responses concerning a redirection of efforts included increasing involvement with continuing education, moving from an instructional development orientation to a larger faculty development role and attempting to modify the university reward structure in order to promote the use of the IIC.

A second major emphasis in the future, according to the respondents, would be on evaluation and research. Many of the directors indicated that their centers would become more involved in the evaluation of student learning, of faculty teaching and of the effectiveness of the centers themselves. Some specific areas of research which were cited were

student performance measures, faculty growth contracts and institutional research.

Five respondents indicated that expansion would occur in the future. Several reported that they would become involved with an increasing number of faculty and department projects within the university as well as expanding to serve off-campus clientele. Two respondents said that they expected to enlarge their staffs. A few directors believed that they would have to rely less on outside soft money for support and one predicted the expansion of the center's audiovisual services.

Five respondents anticipated budget reductions in the future. Two of these directors reported that their grant support would stop during the next three years and that they must seek other funding sources, while three respondents were concerned that their institutional fiscal support would be lessened.

REASONS NOT TO ESTABLISH AN IIC

When asked for their opinions concerning why a higher educational institution might *not* establish an instructional improvement center, the respondents posited that the resistance would come from the faculty and/or the administration, and would be based upon the past record of established instructional improvement centers.

Faculty fear of change was suggested most often as a reason for the absence of instructional improvement centers. In addition to a disruption of the status quo, departments and colleges may see a center as a threat to their autonomy. From a different perspective, faculty may oppose the IIC concept because the improvement of teaching is not given a high priority; they are convinced that their teaching is already excellent and therefore such a center is not required.

Reasons suggested why the university administration might reject an institutional improvement center proposal included these perceptions: (a) there is no need – such a center would simply consume valuable time and resources; (b) an IIC is a frill which can be ill-afforded at a time of high competition for scarce resources; and (c) the existing academic departments and campus services are capable of handling instructional problems on their own.

Existing IIC's in other institutions may also provide reasons for resistance to the establishment of new ones. There is little data which can be used to demonstrate the existence of a positive impact of the centers. Many centers can show only mediocre performance records in terms of the total number of clients served, for example, and therefore it is difficult to justify their cost by this criterion.

Observations and Summary

Data from the study provided a snapshot of the status of IIC's in large institutions of higher learning. While no two centers were exactly alike, there were enough similarities to develop an image of a "typical" IIC, especially for the center which had been in existence for less than five years.

The average newer IIC was staffed by one or two full-time professionals with the assistance of a part-time professional. These professionals most likely represented some speciality within Education or Psychology. Several nonprofessional clerical personnel were also employed by the center. The center director reported to the chief academic officer of the institution. A faculty advisory committee assisted in determining the center's policies and activities. The activities of the center included a combination of service functions (e.g., writing course objectives, producing instructional materials, conducting student evaluations) and faculty development functions (e.g., teaching the faculty how to write objectives, how to select appropriate teaching strategies, and how to carry out formative evaluation). Incentives were provided to the faculty in the forms of mini-grants for specific projects, promotional considerations, reduced teaching loads and leaves of absence with pay. The clients who used the center's resources included both tenured and nontenured faculty and graduate teaching assistants. The clients were distributed rather evenly among the liberal arts, science and professional school faculties. The specific projects undertaken by the center's staff most often centered around individual faculty projects. The typical center promoted faculty support by establishing a respected performance record which met faculty needs and by creating a non-threatening climate in which the faculty could experiment with innovative instructional techniques. The center conducted faculty inservice workshops and distributed promotional literature. It also relied heavily on satisfied clients to inform colleagues of the center's services. The center assiduously tried to avoid any activities which smacked of pressuring the faculty to use its services. The annual operating budget was under $100,000 with well over one-half of that amount coming from the university's general fund and the remainder supplied by outside grant support. It is highly likely that the impetus for establishing the center came either from the university's central administration or the faculty.

The results of the survey also raised some concern for certain areas of operation. The staffs of the centers represent a relatively narrow segment of the disciplines and speciality areas present on major university campuses. Therefore, it would seem advantageous to recruit

some center staff who represent areas other than Education and Psychology.

The IIC's apparently keep few records which document who their clients are and what activities the staffs engage in. This lack of documentation was clearly visible in the study. In addition, little evidence was offered to assess the impact and overall effectiveness of the centers within the institutions. It is important that criteria for evaluating each center's relative effectiveness and concomitant data-gathering procedures be developed.

Difficult to document or measure, but nevertheless present in the written responses to the questionnaire, was a sense of uncertainty on the part of the directors as to how to best proceed. This should not be construed as an indication of poor leadership. When examined closely and sympathetically, it is apparent that the directors and their staffs are working in new roles. There are no historical guidelines to follow, and the goals and objectives are often imprecise and evolving. While the staff is there to help others, there is often no one to help the staff. Some mechanism, similar to the Professional and Organization Development Network in Higher Education, should be established to enable these staff persons to communicate with one another to share their triumphs and their failures with one another.

It must be borne in mind that this study surveyed the status of IIC's from the viewpoint of the directors of these centers. It is reasonable to assume, therefore, that to some degree the data are biased. Future studies of IIC's might include the gathering of data from the faculties served by the centers as well as from the universities' chief administrative officers.

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FOOTNOTES

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[1]The following institutions provided the data reported in the study: University of Alabama, University of California – Berkeley, University of California – Davis, Cleveland State University, Colorado State University, University of Delaware, Florida State University, University of Florida, University of Illinois – Champaign-Urbana, Southern Illinois University – Carbondale, University of Kansas, Kent State University, University of Massachusetts, Central Michigan University, Michigan State University, University of Michigan, Western Michigan University, University of Minnesota, University of Nebraska – Lincoln, Northwestern University, Oklahoma State University, Pennsylvania State University, Purdue University, University of Tennessee, University of South Carolina, and University of Texas. The author is indebted to all of the center directors who contributed to the study.